
Regionalism in Architecture

Session III

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The issues that are being grappled with here strike me as seminal, that is to say that they are the beginning; if the solutions are profound ones, they will have a lasting impact.

I have to tell you quite frankly, not out of politeness or flattery, but it's much more interesting for me to grapple with the problems of your region than it is to be involved with debates as to whether or not coloured keystones should be stuck on skyscrapers in New York or whether modernism or post-modernism should triumph in architectural schools, or the other things that seem to preoccupy the media in so many Western milieus. I feel there are major cultural transformations taking place. We use words like "identity" and "regionalism" as a sort of short-hand to talk about extremely interesting psychological and sociological phenomenon, which deal really with the question of human order in relation to the earth's crust. We are discussing territoriality, a new kind of politics, matters of belief, how religious structures are to be integrated with secular schemes of organisation, and so on. Architecture is in the middle of these predicaments.

Regionalism to me, then, is not a marginal phenomenon. In fact it is bang in the middle of present cultural transformations in the Third World and it's going to become more so but only if the whole thing is approached on a sound philosophical basis. The ultimate test is the form of the building, the quality that it has, something that is elusive, difficult and leaps beyond simple ideological categories into the realm of art. Nonetheless I feel there is a requirement for cleaning up the house of ideas and for laying the basis for theory.

I will say a few words about what I understand regionalism to be. Three weeks ago I wrote a piece called 'Towards an Authentic Regionalism' which it just so happens is going to be published in MIMAR. I want to refer to a few passages from it because they do, in a reasonably succinct way sum up my present reflections on the subject.

I use a motto from a thought written in 1922 by Marcello Piacentini an Italian architect, who said something which to me is still an issue "It involves," he says, "basically resolving the debate between impersonal, international, standardised architecture and localised vernacular architecture. Are the two tendencies really antithetical? Is it possible to arrive at a vision of sane architecture, which will be neither old nor new, but simply true?" I think that it is worthwhile to reflect on that specially given a certain style of thought, which insists on opposing modernity to tradition. This opposition arises from a false understanding of both ideas. The best within modernism can be profoundly rooted in tradition; and the best in tradition is to do with a dynamic process of rethinking certain central kernel ideas. Therefore the problem of continuing a tradition is not one of a fossilized reintroduction of old forms, it is on the contrary a question of penetrating the underlying, generating principles of the past, realising where they are relevant and irrelevant, and then transforming them into present circumstances. That is my view of what tradition is, when it is alive and well. Allow me to quote from my MIMAR piece:

"It would be misleading to speak of monolithic regionalism operating in the world of architecture today, since by very definition, regionalism is committed to finding unique responses to particular places, cultures and climates. There is certainly however a mood gathering momentum, which rejects the glib reproduction of international formulae, and which seeks out continuities with local traditions. No doubt this reflects, increasing self-confidence in the Third World after colonial occupation but it is also part of a wider reaction against simplistic models of modernization. At its worst it may degenerate into a skin-deep, instant history, in which ersatz images of the vernacular combine with pastiches of national, historical prototypes. At its best regionalism penetrates the generating principles and symbolic substructures of the past and then transforms these into forms that are right for the changing social order

of the present. It is a matter of sensing beneath the surface, the memories, myths and aspirations that gave a society coherence and energy and then providing these with an authentic expression in architectural arrangement. The hope is to produce buildings of a certain timeless character, which fuse old and new, regional and universal

'Authentic regionalism' stands out against all hackneyed and devalued versions of culture, whether these come from the international economic order, from nationalist propaganda, or, more recently, from pan-Islamic clichés.

The irrelevantly employed glass box and the tacky version of the Arabian Nights are both architectural enemies. So are all those ideological manipulations of religion that have reduced the Faith to platitudes and slogans. Regionalism looks for sustaining spiritual forces and refuses to accept that a tradition is a fixed set of devices and images. It sees the past as a series of superimposed layers, of inventions, from the earliest nomadic forms, to villages and towns to later imperial and even colonial frameworks, because colonialism is part of the national experience, and has to be integrated even if it is an unpleasant memory. It identifies many of the most relevant patterns which deal with climate, local materials and geography in epochs before the arrival of Islam. The aim is to unravel the layers, to see how indigenous archetypes have been transformed by invading forms, and in turn to see how foreign imports have been adapted to the cultural soil. The present task is to keep the process moving, to find the right balance between the local, national and international.

Region is at best a hazy notion. It may refer to the distribution of racial or ethnic groups, common geographical or climatic features, the political boundaries limiting a tribe or some other federation. Rarely does it make sense to make a direct equation between the region and nation or between the region and religion. In these circumstances it is necessary to beware of deterministic arguments and of jumping automatically from one region to one set of forms. The grass-root idea of culture is useful so long as it forces attention upon basic patterns in the traditional architecture of the region, the climate or the landscape, or to ways of handling materials. It is misleading the moment it ignores the role of exterior sources. Most vernaculars are in fact hybrids of indigenous and imported types and these types also change and adapt. To pretend that a peasant culture contains some immutable essences has an obvious romantic appeal and has actually been used in support of myths of national identity. The authentic regionalist acknowledges that conditions alter drastically and that the present world is one of increasing interchange and inter-dependence.

When it comes to reading local traditions there is obviously no set recipe. Every architect will have his favourite village, mosque, city or view from a window. Beyond the particular, the regionalist tries to see the type, the general law, the originating principle. The vernacular offers numerous lessons for dealing with extremes of climate, but these can be translated into quite different building functions and modern technologies. Monuments are studied not just for their superficialities of style but for deeper lessons of order. The fabric of the city yields many secrets of scale, in handling open spaces and transitions. Tradition is penetrated for lasting humane and artistic value, not as a source for the merely picturesque scenography. Fossilization and pointless modernity are equally to be avoided. To reduce a tradition to still-born recipes is actually to kill it. To ignore it altogether is also the height of folly.

Regionalism is inevitably involved in struggle between city and country, industry and handicraft, peasant values and the uprootedness of the metropolis. Just as traditionalism is a reaction against loss of continuity, so regionalism is a restorative philosophy in favour of supposed raw harmony between people, their artifacts and nature. Regionalism is not likely to appeal to the blatant technocrat, nor to the parvenu who recalls that working in fields for twelve hours a day in exchange for virtually nothing may not be the ideal life. Regionalist yearnings are especially appealing to sensitive intellectuals who are troubled by the fragmentation that seems to come with industrialization, but who also wish to maintain the mobility, complexity of viewpoint and even wealth that industrialism affords. It is for this reason that some of the most beautiful regionalist experiments are undertaken for the rich, cultivated collector of handicrafts. Another obvious outlet is the sophisticated hotel where the battered souls of the advanced industrial nations can be soothed by a swimming pool and a little piped folklore. Here the recipe is of course mud-walls without fleas, village clusters with parking underneath, air-conditioning and one or two windcatchers.

Pieces of farm equipment and tribal rugs appear on the walls of the well-to-do, at about the same moment the shabby plastic sandals and cheap nylon shirts hit the lower end of the souk. The bigger picture is one in which the culture of the rural base deteriorates as the poor rush away from their roots towards the promise and desolation of the city, with its jobs and the money economy. The new urban landscape is not uplifting and has a banal similarity from one place to another in the Third World, all the way from the glossy consumerist clichés of the rich to the squatter settlements and the instant concrete and brick houses of the ex-poor. Gradually the same ugliness is carried back to the village like a prized motor-cycle, a sign

that one is 'making it' back in Cairo or Casablanca or Islamabad.

If regionalism means the creation of a handful of arcane essays and aesthetic peasantism it will obviously have only the slightest impact on these living conditions. Perhaps the whole matter can be put on a much broader footing. A philosophy might be articulated that addresses the whole range of building types from rural and traditional, for example village houses and mosques, to modern and imported, for example international airports and skyscrapers. The former needs preserving or, when new conditions emerge, re-invigorating as in the case of mosque typology. The idea of fixing on one cluster of images as the key to tradition is often a false one. Modern building types, need to be regionalized but at a level that is much deeper than stylistic or ornamental adornment. In any case the architect might use each problem as a chance to demonstrate a rural or an urban ideal, a generic set of forms transcending the particular case. It is best that this procedure results in a sort of equivalent to the pattern languages and common usages or vernaculars, as they are called, of the past. In short a historical imagination of sufficient range and depth may realise that the architecture of the past, now called Islamic, had precisely such generic vocabularies for their own epoch and that these blended together, international formulae with regional ones. It is necessary to dig up these sub-structures and blend them with the best rather than the worst in the modern tradition.

To mention modern architecture is to immediately raise the bogey-man of the so-called 'international style', or at least that thoroughly debased version of modern architecture that was peddled around the world by multi-nationals and planning bureaucracies during the 1950's and the 1960's and which often took the form of banal boxes for housing and offices. It seemed as if the concrete frame and the air-conditioner were together conspiring to demolish local identity from architecture altogether. Understandably such buildings have been targeted as instruments of neo-colonialism and urban destruction, the opposite of traditional values of any kind. This may be true but the answer does not lie in just changing the historical clothes of industrial buildings or in just pretending that modernization will go away. Nor will anything of lasting value be created if Third World architectural beliefs simply pick up the latest fashionable tricks from the United States and Western Europe. Post-modernism is part of the disease, not the cure since it reduces the problem of tradition to a trivial manipulation of signs and references and since its trendy aestheticism masks a cynical and reactionary cultural stance. Even if the Third World could afford such confectionary it would soon tire of an import which gave so little sustenance. The

moment is right for the assertion of an architectural value-system that eschews the aridity of off-hand utilitarianism and the bogus remedy of phoney historicism. This is true everywhere in the world. Authentic regionalism tries to penetrate to what is of lasting worth in the present culture and in tradition. Arbitrariness and superficiality are its enemies.

The architect needs schemata of today if he is not to produce a debased version of yesterday and this is where the best rather than the worst in the modern movement can still provide lessons. It is quite misleading to lump the whole of modern architecture together as a rootless, functionalist and anti-symbolic phenomenon. The best buildings have been based upon fundamentals extracted from the past, some even provide valuable signposts towards an authentic regionalism. One thinks of Frank Lloyd Wright's south-western houses of the 1920's with their translation of principles from adobe, from meso-American and even geological forms; of Alito's reliance upon Kavelian villages and prototypes, of Le Corbusier's investigations of folk cultures in his domestic designs of the 1930's and of his attempt, admittedly flawed, of translating basic Indian typologies for dealing with climate, rhetoric and space, in his buildings in Ahmedabad and Chandigarh in the 1950's. (I recently published on Corbusier's attitude to tradition which is for the moment only in French. It deals with the sketches he did of Diwans, of temple forms, of the use of fundamental organisational patterns of Indian architecture, and how profoundly influential these were in the buildings in Chandigarh.) Again one considers Kahn's no less penetrating understanding of Indian citadel prototypes in the Indian Management Building in Ahmedabad, or of Mughal centralised examples in the Parliament in Dhaka.

In the 1940's and 1950's the Mexican architect Luis Barragan fused together modernist simplicity and spatial conceptions with echoes of Mexico's Hispanic and ancient past, in an evocative language of plain walls, water tanks and coloured planes. In Japan in the 1950's the task was to link modernism with the national tradition and such architects as Kenzo Tange explored the parallelisms between the concrete frame and timber constructions. These are all examples of buildings combining a sense of ancient value with rigorous modernity."

Well, I am not going to go into all of that in this paper. That is the broad position. In my MIMAR article I went on to say a few words about much more recent, to my mind successful, attempts of regionalism. I refer to the philosophy of Hassan Fathy. I also look at its debasement into a kind of instant Islamic identity-kit being carted around from one end of the world to the other. It looks also at the question of what is actually happening to the vernacular and in my scheme of

things of broad regionalism one has to at one end somehow have the country doctor architect who helps to maintain what is worthwhile within the village structure while allowing the appropriate modernization to occur and maintain the rural base, and at the other extreme we have the problem of the airline terminal or the rethinking of the skyscraper in terms of tropical architecture or desert architecture. I also wrote at some length about the cold climate, we sometimes tend to forget there is such a thing as a frigid cold climate regionalism, for example Ralph Erskine in Scandinavia, and as Mr. Frampton suggested there are pockets of regionalism in the United States that are quite active. Now however I wish to come to the question of India because I believe that there are some parallel questions between the Bangladeshi predicament and the Indian one.

“Regionalist ideals are bound to function quite differently in countries with a weighty architectural past than in countries with little visible tradition. Attitudes toward modernization also play a part. Mexico accepted modern architecture as part of an aggressive and liberal mythos after the revolution and they imported prototypes in the international style. The story of ensuing architecture was of adaptation of these models to indigenous tradition. Today the process goes on with architects like Gonzales de León, for example. With India the entry of modern forms occurred after independence primarily in the form of Le Corbusier and to a lesser degree Louis Kahn, who had long since left behind any reminiscence of the “international style” and were in fact beginning to explore archaic and primitivist values. Le Corbusier’s Indian works evolved a sort of modern Indian grammar of protected roofs against rain and sun, monumental louvres and deep-cut verandahs for air and shade, water-tanks, sluices, shaded porticos and halls. He drew many lessons from diverse periods of Indian architectural tradition.

The problem for inheritors of Le Corbusier in India has been to hang on to the lasting values in his architecture but without doing weak copies. At the same time it has been necessary to reject some of his climatic solutions as inadequate and his urbanism as too rigid. To follow the career of such Indians as Charles Correa and Balkrishna Doshi is to witness the struggle for emancipation from forceful examples and a search for solutions more truly suited to the complexities of the contemporary Indian experience. Yet this very struggle with a figure of such dimension lends their work a cosmopolitan tension that distinguishes it from the product of an artist who just starts with home-grown material. Surely the reason that Correa’s work has attracted so much attention is because it seems without effort to demolish the barriers between old and new, monumental and folk and because it is based on consistent strategies directed to the outdoor

room, the ambiguous edge, the shaded platform, the meandering route and so on. In other words he has tried to work out a viable modern language that draws upon past eras but without mimicking them. More than that Correa had to adapt his solutions to the wide range of Indian climate, from the dry heat of the north to the damp tropical conditions of the south

Raj Rewal has also been preoccupied with the idea of modern buildings as an analogue for traditional urban fabrics. The Asian Games Housing in the south of Delhi amounts to a critique of point-block planning. The individual units are a limited number of types that are designed to maximise privacy and cross ventilation, but these are combined with a rich variation that also enlivens the spaces in between. These are handled in hierarchies through public to ever more private zones of transition. In effect Rewal succeeds in translating the broad principles of desert towns like Jaisalmer, which he began to study about twenty years ago. In this example the ‘Havelis’ courtyard houses of complex sections, are locked together with streets, squares, gates and doorways in a single system. But the result does not revert to a cute townscape. The results are disciplined by geometry and controlled vistas. The recent Institute of Immunology in Delhi reveals his passionate attachment to Mughal examples.

The scheme is composed of a sequence of outdoor rooms with linking galleries and steps. If the archetypes for the hot, dry climate are the tent and the thick-walled courtyard dwelling, the basic form for the tropics is found in the wooden hut on poles, with a steep and overhanging roof against rain and a thin membrane wall for the passage of damp air. Variations on the scheme can be found in South and South-eastern Asia from the tip of India to the islands of the Pacific. The general type informs the range of functions from house to bungalows, to palaces and temples and over the centuries many accretions have been brought by Chinese, Portuguese and Dutch traders.

The colonisation absorbs and is absorbed and creates mutations of the basic system. In Sri Lanka white washed walls and tiled roofs blended with the system and it is this vernacular which has been the point of departure for the architecture of Geoffrey Bawa. His studio in the Colombo suburb, originally I believe designed as a house is a work of a high order which celebrates the poetics of the bungalow in a tightly-controlled sequence of indoor and outdoor space. The moment one enters the precincts one is drawn along the main axis by the alluring rectangle of greenery to the rear and by the reflecting pool at the heart of the plan. This borders one side of a court and forces one to a parallel line of movement prior to discovering lateral expansion into rooms that are linked to the outside by verandahs. Above the pool there is a gap

between the tiled roofs through which the monsoon can cascade. The device recalls the Southern Indian palace of Mahaballipuram and even a Roman impluvium. The ambiguities of space engendered by slight level changes, water and light would not, however, be out of place in the Alhambra. What appears to be a subtle exercise in abstract control of the vernacular emerges as an erudite microcosm, a richly allusive vocabulary based on simplest of means but a broad range of sources. Bawa has used local craftsmanship to the full — stone capitals, wooden columns with slight entices, the details, only serve to emphasise the building's generating ideas."

"In the Kuwait National Assembly Building the Danish architect Jorn Utzon also has the difficult task of giving shape to a unique governmental system combining regal, tribal, oligarchic and bureaucratic elements. At a practical level it was a question of making all the departments visible and available from the entrance and it was this that led to the idea of a central street with the main assembly to one side and a vast hall open to the sea at the head. Individual apartments were restricted to two-storey height and arranged round their own courtyards. These cells could be gradually added to so that the plan is like a bazaar with amorphous edges extending towards the rectangular boundary. The entire complex was covered by a spreading roof and in the case of the main chamber hall there's an uncanny echo of the billowing forms of the tent. Utzon referred to the 'purity of Islamic structure' and his handling of concrete, light and space also echoes qualities of Le Corbusier's parliament in Chandigarh. The conception of the sheltering roof involves tribal memories to do with the princely tents as Utzon explains. 'The dangerously strong sunshine in Kuwait makes it necessary to protect yourself in the shade. The shade is vital to your existence and the hall which provides shade for the public meetings could perhaps be considered symbolic of the protection the ruler extends to his people. There is an Arab saying 'when a ruler dies his shadow is lost'.

Utzon's Kuwait National Assembly rests upon archetypes of its local society and translates these into a building that is of its time. It fuses new and old, regional and universal, and extends both modern movement and middle-eastern traditions. In the same way Kahn in his National Assembly Building in Dhaka extended both the modern movement and local regional tradition of the Indian sub-continent and Bangladesh. It touches those chords that transcend styles and conventions and through the direct impact of light, space, materials and proportions realises an institutional framework of general societal importance. (The programme is the centre of the thing — programme understood as something deeper than a list of requirements, as a societal impulse,

something with a certain profundity.) This is what monumental architecture has always aspired to do by giving shape to communal ideas. Instead of aping the past the authentic regionalist looks beneath the surface to the basics and these he attempts to transform. Enthralled by the mosque of Ibu Tulun, the harmony of Fez or the majesty of Humayun's tomb, he asks himself "How would these masters build today?"

I would like now to turn to Louis Kahn's building in Dhaka. Discussions of modern architecture are bedevilled by simplistic categories such as 'international style'. Works of any depth draw upon many eras simultaneously yet still belong very much to their own time. It often seems to me the Assembly building in Dhaka represents quite extraordinary insight into, on the one hand, the heritage Kahn bought with him, which took him back through modern architecture to the fundamentals of organisation in the classical system going back to things like the ancient baths, the great niche-forms and approaches. At the same time it touched a realm of what we might call archetypes within architectural thought, of basic forms. He carried these with him when he came here and he very quickly understood the parallelisms, if you like, the deep structural links with the fundamentals of the local tradition. What he read, I believe, is a pattern which is very very deep in Bangladeshi architecture which occurred rather early on even before the arrival of the Mughals. It has to do with the fusion of two centralised traditions, one from Islam and one ultimately from Buddhism. The thing that intrigues me about the architecture of the Sultanate in Bangladesh is that process of transformation, of underlying structures that are already there; when another force comes in, absorption takes place in both directions, and so the process goes on. In Kahn's planning organisation of the building, his image of the state, reads through Mughal schemata (I believe that the building is based very substantially on the tomb of Humayun in its organisation) to the more ancient centralised traditions. The question of how you put the centralised form together with a polygonal form, with cross axes, with movement around recalls certain ancestral memories of architecture in this region. Yet the result is not a pastiche, the result is a translation into a thoroughly modern building. The result is also timeless, in a hundred years one will not bother to consider when it was made. That to me is the mark of a real work of architecture; one quite forgets the problem of style altogether and one simply says, well, this is a major addition to the stock of cultural memories. That should be the ambition of regionalism not a trite thing, simply to do with Romantic peasantism but to do with what I would call cultural excavation. That to me is the challenge in the present Third World circumstances — how to be modern and, ancient at the same time.